DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 264 176 SP 026 558

AUTHOR Seiferth, Berniece B.; Samuel, Marie I.
TITLE Cooperating Teachers: Why Not the Best?
PUB DATE [84]
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cooperating Teachers; Feedback; Higher Education; *Preservice Teacher Education; Role Models; *Student Teacher Attitudes; *Student Teachers; Teacher Behavior; Teacher Characteristics; Teacher Effectiveness; *Teacher Student Relationship

ABSTRACT

At the conclusion of each student teaching semester, 50 student teachers enrolled at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale were asked to list positive and negative influences of their cooperating teachers. The study was conducted over a period of three years with three different sets of student teachers. Listings of the participants fell into three categories: interpersonal relationships, personality, and professional ability or expertise of the cooperating teachers. Results indicated that student teachers want and need constant and on-going feedback given in a tactful and polite way. Negative criticisms as well as positive were acceptable. Student teachers felt they did their best work when the teacher was friendly, accepting, understanding of the trauma of student teaching, and exhibited confidence in the ability of the student teacher in various areas. It is suggested that pitfalls to be avoided by cooperating teachers with student teachers are failure to offer critiques or feedback, and failure to develop better relationships with their student teachers. (JD)

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Cooperating Teachers: Why not the Best?

Berniece B. Seiferth, Ed.D
Professor of Education
Southern Illinois University - Carbondale
Carbondale, IL 62901
and
Marie I. Samuel, M.A.
Art Instructor
Carterville, IL High School, IL 62918

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Abstract

For five consecutive semesters, the student teachers assigned to my student teaching center were asked at the last seminar to record anonymously their impressions of their respective cooperating teachers. They were given no information about how former student teachers had reacted nor were any leading suggestions made. They were given ample time to record all the favorable qualities demonstrated by their cooperating teachers that helped student teachers to develop during their teaching experience. The student teachers also listed the unfavorable characteristics that made the student teaching experience more difficult.

The responses were tabulated and definite patterns emerged. It was possible to group the responses into categories. This paper includes the gathering of information from a good-sized sample of subjects in a free response situation. Also, it was a project that developed over a period of two and a half years, so that it represents a wide variety of student teachers from an extensive range of teaching areas and levels. The findings have been tallied systematically with the 10 qualities most favored and unfavored determined. The most frequently mentioned qualities then were placed in categories, such as cooperating teacher strengths in teaching abilities or weaknesses, interpersonal skills and personality.

Several recommendations for practicing or prospective cooperating teachers can be made from the strength of the replies of the student

teachers, such as majoring on developing interpersonal skills or friendliness, building self-esteem in the student teachers, allowing freedom to teach and being an excellent role model as a professional. Pitfalls to avoid also were identified, especially failure to give feedback, both negative as well as positive.

COOPERATING TEACHERS: WHY NOT THE BEST

With all due respect to Admiral Hiram Rickover who first coined the phrase, "Why not the best?" and to President Jimmy Carter who subsequently used it as the title of one of his books, we need to address the question of why aren't the best and brightest public school teachers serving as cooperating teachers. In view of numerous research studies that have documented the importance of the role of the cooperating teacher, it appears that more attention needs to be directed toward identifying the characteristics of this significant other who contributes so much to the professional development of neophyte teachers.

Empathy and understanding were identified as important to student teachers (Karmos and Jacko, 1977), so survival concerns enter the picture before mastery in the acquisition of teaching skills. The process of learning to teach is complex, and Karmos and Jacko found professional skills development to be less important to student teachers than personal support of role development. Role development has been identified as necessary in student teaching with guidance and preparation for the student teaching role influencing modelling of the student teacher. Cooperating teachers who see themselves as role models have been found to demonstrate rather than give verbal instructions to student teachers of appropriate behaviors (Wright, Silvern and Burkhalter, 1982).

Although there has been a lack of change in teacher education during the last 20 years, in the past decade educational research has moved toward the study of observable behaviors in the teaching/learning process. These are both alterable and trainable once identified and studied. These behaviors consist of classroom management skills such as structuring physical space to facilitate learning activities, strategies to maintain student attention while minimizing disruptive behavior, giving students responsibility while pacing

the student work rate, and using advanced planning to anticipate needs (Hawley, Rosenholtz and others, 1984). Focusing on these skills moves beyond earlier concerns with personality or feelings.

Various methods used by cooperating teachers to change behavior on the part of the student teacher include suggesting professional books for the student teacher pertaining to personal growth, providing supplementary materials for a unit being planned by the student teacher, suggesting new ideas or different methods of teaching a concept, and being cooperative in supplying the student teacher with aids (Copas, 1984).

It is felt that school systems should share the responsibility for proper selection of cooperating teachers with representatives of teacher education programs to ensure transmission of desired teaching methods. Understanding how the cooperating teacher communicates with the student teacher could aid in the selection and training of superior cooperating teachers. Having contact with the university is felt to be an incentive for this group of teachers who are felt to be "students of teaching." (Whaley and Wolfe, 1984).

To determine positive and negative characteristics of cooperating teachers as judged by student teachers, the authors used a free-response type of research to elicit information from student teachers over a period of three years. Fifty student teachers enrolled at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale participated in the study. At the conclusion of each student teaching semester, student teachers were asked to list anonymously positive and negative influences of their cooperating teachers. No suggestions about the type of comments desired were given nor were examples of statements by former student teachers used. Comments were strictly free response.

Many interesting facts came to light after the responses were tallied. Not the least was that while a total of 284 positive remarks were listed, only 106 negative ones were considered important enough to record. This

fact alone would lead to the conclusion that some of the least effective cooperating teachers have been weeded from the program. Another intersting fact is that 38 different items of a negative nature were listed while 50 positive ones were.

The positive characteristics mentioned most frequently was "Offered constructive criticism and honesty in positive/negative feedback" for 21 times followed closely by "Gave helpful suggestions in a tactful polite way" for 19 times. Eleven traits were mentioned only once.

On the negative side, 19 students listed "No critiques or feedback" as their major complaint followed by "Disorganized, no structure or specific plan of action", by seven and "No patience/understanding of own students, low expectations, at war with classes, disliked students" also listed by seven. Fourteen of the negative points were listed only once.

The following tables depict the most quoted positive and negative qualities and the number of students who recorded them.

MOST VALUED CHARACTERISTICS IN COOPERATING TEACHERS	NUMBER RECORDING
Constructive criticism and honesty in positive/negative feedback	21
Gave helpful suggestions in a tactful, polite way	19
Friendly	17
Allowed me to make decisions on tests/discipline	16
Shared ideas/materials for my collection and teaching	15
Showed confidence/respect/support for my teaching skills	11
Shared expectations/instructions	11
Understanding/sympathetic/senstive/interested in my needs	10
Allowed me to be creative	10

LEAST VALUED CHARACTERISTICS IN COOPERATING TEACHERS	NUMBER RECORDING
No critiques or feedback	19
No patience/understanding of own students, low expectations, at war with classes, disliked students	7
Disorganized, no structure or specific plan of action	7
Evaluated me too sharply	5
Gave too little help with planning	5
No specific expectations of me	4
Needed to stay in classroom more to observe me	4

Probably the most apparent and important fact shown by these two tables is the larger number of students who listed positive qualities than negative ones. This is also an encouraging part of this study. It also was apparent that the listings of the student teachers fell into three categories: 1) interpersonal relationships, 2) personality, and 3) professional ability or expertise of the cooperating teachers.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Since we are convinced that the cooperating teacher is the most significant other in the preparation of student teachers, it is simple to study the results of this informal research project to find out what student teachers want and don't want in a cooperating teacher. First, it is clear that they want and need feedback, constant, on-going but given in a tactful and polite way. At least 15 of them expressed a desire to receive negative criticism as well as positive. On the negative list, this lack of critique or feedback was the most often listed quality that had been lacking in their experience. Also the student teachers felt they did their best work where the teacher was friendly, accepting, understanding of the trauma of student teaching and exhibited confidence

in the ability of the student teacher in various areas.

Pitfalls to be avoided by cooperating teachers with student teachers are failure to offer critiques or feedback and failure to develop better relationships with their own students. This supports the fact that student teachers feel that student teaching is a learning experience and they want suggestions to improve their skills in all areas. Since the personality of the cooperating teacher affects student teachers decidedly, this factor could be considered in future recruitment efforts. Teachers who make an attempt to develop skills in interpersonal relationships are apt to be more effective role models for the student teacher.

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